

The Role of Literature in Enhancing Critical Thinking and Language Skills: A Study of Victor Hugo's *Les Misérables*

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Abstract

This study explores the impact of literature, specifically Victor Hugo's *Les Misérables*, on the development of language skills and critical thinking among advanced French literature students. Utilizing Jean-Louis Dufays' theory of textual interpretation, the research examines how engaging with complex literary texts can enhance vocabulary, syntactic understanding, and critical analytical skills. The main research question is: Can reading and analyzing *Les Misérables* improve students' ability to analyze texts critically and engage with philosophical and social themes? The study involved 20 seventh-semester French literature students, and data were collected through semi-structured interviews, classroom observations, and content analysis of students' written work. Pearson correlation analysis demonstrated a strong relationship between students' pre-test and post-test scores, confirming that literature can significantly enhance both linguistic and critical thinking skills. The findings suggest that literature is an essential tool for developing advanced language proficiency and critical evaluation abilities.

Keywords: Critical Thinking, Literature, Language Skills, *Les Misérables*, Textual Analysis.

1. Introduction

Literature has long been recognized as one of the fundamental tools in language education and the transmission of various cultures, playing a crucial role in enhancing both linguistic and cognitive skills. The significance of literature, particularly in strengthening critical thinking, goes beyond mere language acquisition, turning literary texts into powerful instruments for developing the intellectual and analytical abilities of language learners. This paper examines the role of literature in promoting critical thinking, specifically analyzing the impact of Victor Hugo's *Les Misérables* in teaching the French language. Utilizing Jean-Louis Dufays' theory of textual interpretation, this research aims to demonstrate how literature can serve as an effective educational tool for developing students' analytical and critical thinking skills.

The study is designed to investigate the role of literary texts in enhancing the critical thinking abilities of French language students. Instead of addressing the general influence of literature on critical thinking, the research questions are formulated more precisely to determine whether the reading and analysis of Victor Hugo's *Les Misérables* can improve the students' skills in textual analysis, reasoning, and critical evaluation. The key research questions are as follows:

- Does the study of *Les Misérables* enhance students' skills in analyzing literary texts?
- Does reading this novel lead to improved reasoning and logical thinking skills in students?
- Do students' critical evaluation abilities and capacity to analyze complex issues increase after studying *Les Misérables*?

These questions guide the research toward a more detailed analysis of the role of literature in fostering critical thinking. By employing pre-test and post-test assessments and statistical analyses such as Pearson correlation, this study seeks to accurately measure students' progress in both linguistic and cognitive domains.

The importance of the research findings lies in their potential to contribute to the development of new approaches in the field of language and literature education. Educational programs that incorporate literature to promote critical thinking not only enhance linguistic skills but also strengthen students' ability to tackle complex issues and think independently. Thus, the results of this research could serve as a foundation for designing more effective educational programs in French language and literature, offering a novel solution for fostering critical thinking skills in language learners.

Jean-Louis Dufays' theory of textual interpretation serves as the theoretical framework for this research. This theory emphasizes the active engagement of the reader with the text and the discovery of multiple layers of meaning. According to Dufays, every literary text contains several layers of meaning that can only be uncovered through the active interaction of the reader and their reinterpretations. Dufays stresses that readers must go beyond the surface meanings of texts and, through deep analysis, reach new understandings of the material.

In this research, three key concepts from Dufays' theory are used to analyze *Les Misérables*:

- Layers of meaning: One of the important concepts in Dufays' theory is the presence of various layers of meaning in a literary work. *Les Misérables*, with its numerous philosophical, social, and ethical themes, has been chosen as a complex work to be studied. The analysis of these layers helps students strengthen their interpretative and critical skills.
- The role of the reader in interpretation: From Dufays' perspective, the meaning of a text is only grasped through the active engagement of the reader. In this study, the focus is on how students' interaction with *Les Misérables* can contribute to the enhancement of their critical thinking.
- Interpretation as an active process: Dufays considers textual interpretation to be an active process that encourages readers to explore and analyze further. In this research, students were encouraged to use interactive interpretation methods to analyze the novel, thereby improving their critical thinking skills.

The choice of *Les Misérables* as the primary text for this research is based on several factors. In addition to its multi-layered content and complex themes, this novel is one of the most significant works of French literature and has been widely used in similar research in the field of language and literature education. The philosophical, social, and ethical themes of this work make it an ideal tool for fostering critical thinking. Furthermore, the novel's cultural and linguistic richness leaves a profound impact on the reader and has the potential to enhance students' intellectual and analytical capabilities.

The results of this research indicate that students who actively engaged with *Les Misérables* not only improved their linguistic skills but also significantly enhanced their critical thinking and independent analytical abilities. These findings suggest that interpretive and interactive approaches to literature teaching can have a substantial impact on improving students' linguistic and critical thinking skills.

1.1. Literature Review

Research in the field of literature education indicates that, for decades, this domain has been recognized as one of the most effective approaches in language learning. Studies presented in the book *Approches didactiques de la littérature* highlight that literature not only aids in enhancing language skills such as reading and writing, but also contributes to the development of students' critical thinking and creativity. Research has demonstrated that interactive and group-

based teaching methods, along with the incorporation of modern technologies, can significantly boost students' motivation to learn literature, thereby improving their performance in language acquisition.

-Atefeh Khodaei (2018), in an article titled "The Impact of Literature on Language Learning" published in the 7th issue of the *Journal of Persian Language Education Studies*, examined the impact of literary texts on language education. This study employed qualitative analysis and content review methods and found that integrating literature into language instruction significantly improves language skills, enhances vocabulary, reading speed, and fosters positive interaction between learners and the text. The findings suggest that literature can be an effective tool for strengthening all language skills.

-Mirzaei Hesarian (2011), in an article published on language and Persian literature learning, addressed the use of literature in language education, emphasizing the importance of employing literary texts to enhance writing skills. This study, conducted through experimental research and content analysis, revealed that reading literature helps students effectively learn how to use words and sentence structures, which directly improves their writing skills.

-Research conducted by Florey and Cordonier (2010) illustrates that literature, as an effective educational tool, can significantly contribute to the development of language skills such as reading, writing, and conversation. These studies emphasize that engaging with literary texts allows students to achieve not only a deeper understanding of the language but also enhances their critical thinking and creativity. As a result, literature has been recognized as a key teaching method in language classrooms, which can lead to improved performance among language learners.

The innovation of the present study lies in its focus on the use of interactive teaching methods and modern technologies in literature education, in addition to emphasizing the impact of literature on enhancing language skills and critical thinking.

2. Theoretical Framework

Jean-Louis Dufays' theory of textual interpretation is one of the most significant theoretical frameworks in the field of literary analysis, especially in language and literature education. Dufays argues that each literary text contains multiple layers of meaning, and it is the reader's responsibility to actively engage with the text to uncover its hidden meanings. His theory emphasizes the importance of interaction between the reader and the text, proposing that reading and interpreting a literary work should not be a passive process of receiving predetermined meanings but rather an active endeavor where the reader plays a crucial role.

In his work, particularly in *Approches didactiques de la littérature* (2019), Dufays explains that the reader approaches the text with their own experiences and knowledge, exploring the various layers to derive meanings beyond the surface level of the words. This process allows the reader to participate actively in reinterpreting and rethinking the concepts presented. According to this theory, literary texts do not hold a single, fixed meaning; instead, they can acquire multiple interpretations depending on the reader's context and interaction with the text (Denizot & Dufays, 2019).

Dufays also highlights the "subjective nature of interpretation," stressing that the reader's personal experiences and intellectual background significantly influence their understanding and reinterpretation of literary texts. This interactive and dynamic approach encourages readers to explore deeper and more complex layers of meaning, thereby fostering critical thinking (Daston, 2023).

Moreover, Dufays underscores the importance of the reader's cultural and social context. He posits that each reader, influenced by their cultural background, may derive different interpretations from a single text, reflecting the diversity of meanings that can emerge through textual interaction (Benson, 2021). Therefore, literature education should include group discussions and exchanges of viewpoints to enable students to examine different perspectives and strengthen their critical thinking skills.

Dufays' theory of textual interpretation asserts that literary works have multiple layers of meaning that are revealed through the reader's active engagement with the text. He suggests that readers should not limit themselves to surface-level meanings but should critically interact with the text, probing deeper to uncover hidden meanings. This approach encourages readers to ask new questions and explore diverse perspectives, ultimately enhancing their critical thinking skills.

In the analysis of Victor Hugo's *Les Misérables*, this approach helps the reader move beyond the simple narrative of injustice and poverty to delve into the philosophical, ethical, and social concepts embedded in the deeper layers of the text. Hugo addresses issues such as justice, poverty, social corruption, and ethics, each of which requires a multilayered analysis. Students and language learners, through textual interpretation and critical inquiry, are able to arrive at more profound evaluations and stronger arguments about the themes presented in the novel.

One of the key concepts in Dufays' theory is the "active role of the reader." This is clearly evident in the analysis of *Les Misérables*, where the reader must not passively accept the meaning of the text but instead actively engage in the creation of meaning. Dufays believes that the meaning of a literary work emerges only through the reader's active interaction with the text, with each reader potentially arriving at different interpretations, fostering new insights and critical thought.

Furthermore, Dufays views textual interpretation as a "dynamic process," meaning that text analysis is an ongoing and evolving experience. In the case of *Les Misérables*, students, through constant questioning and analysis of each part of the novel, gain new understandings of the characters, situations, and power dynamics in the society that Hugo

portrays. As a result, this approach not only facilitates a deeper comprehension of the literature but also allows students to sharpen their critical thinking skills and enhance their ability to analyze complex social and philosophical issues.

Thus, Dufays' theory of textual interpretation, with its focus on the active involvement of the reader and the exploration of multiple layers of meaning, provides an effective framework for analyzing *Les Misérables*. It ultimately contributes to the development of students' critical thinking and analytical abilities.

2.1. Dufays' Theory

To explain Dufays' theory regarding the role of literature in enhancing language skills and critical thinking, we can highlight the pivotal role of literature in the development of two key areas: linguistic skills (language-structural) and critical thinking (intellectual-analytical).

1. Phase One: Linguistic Skills

- In this phase, literature serves as a tool for enriching vocabulary and improving students' mastery of linguistic structures. Through reading literary texts, students become familiar with language complexities, syntactic structures, and specialized vocabulary. These skills are enhanced through the repetition and analysis of texts.

- Based on perspectives from sources like interactive methods, the use of literature, especially at an advanced level, is regarded as one of the best tools for teaching grammar and specialized vocabulary.

2. Phase Two: Critical Thinking

- In the second phase, literature plays a crucial role in fostering critical thinking skills. Readers engage with various texts and are compelled to comprehend deeper meanings, hidden concepts, and relationships between different themes. Specifically, critical thinking is developed through the analysis of characters, themes, and narrative strategies in literary works. This type of analysis helps students move beyond simple verbal communication and engage with complex meanings.

- Additionally, the integration of culture and language in literature teaching is one of the primary approaches emphasized for cultivating analytical abilities across different sections.

This theory posits that the combination of these two phases simultaneously strengthens both the linguistic and analytical skills of language learners.

2.2. Study Population

This study involved 20 seventh-semester French literature students from the University of Science and Research. These students were selected based on their advanced linguistic proficiency and sufficient experience in literary text analysis. The selection criteria focused on their ability to critically analyze complex texts and actively participate in discussions related to literature.

The study aimed to examine the role of literary texts in enhancing students' critical thinking and language skills. Victor Hugo's *Les Misérables* was chosen as the primary text due to its multi-layered content and complex themes, such as justice, poverty, morality, and social conditions, which provide an ideal framework for critical analysis. The research questions focused on assessing the impact of studying this text on students' vocabulary development, as well as their ability to critically analyze characters and the philosophical and social themes in the novel.

During classroom sessions, students' linguistic and analytical behaviors were recorded through direct observation. Their active participation in class discussions on character analysis and philosophical concepts such as justice and poverty was closely monitored and evaluated. These sessions provided an opportunity for students to apply their language skills and engage in critical thinking in practice.

Additionally, students' analytical writings on the characters and themes in *Les Misérables* were collected and subjected to qualitative analysis. This analysis aimed to evaluate their use of advanced vocabulary and rich linguistic structures in their writings, as well as the depth of their critical thinking when addressing complex social and philosophical concepts. The main goal was to assess their ability to critically analyze and express their views on these themes with precision.

3. Data Collection Tools

1. Semi-structured Interviews: These interviews were designed to explore the role of literary texts in enhancing students' critical thinking and language skills. The interview questions focused on the impact of reading *Les Misérables* on vocabulary development, students' ability to critically analyze and interpret characters, and their understanding of social and philosophical concepts such as justice and poverty.

2. Classroom Observation: In-class observations were conducted to document students' linguistic and analytical behaviors. Students' participation in class discussions on character analysis and philosophical concepts like justice and poverty was carefully evaluated. The purpose of the observation was to assess how students utilized critical reasoning in analyzing these themes.

3. Written Content Analysis: Students' analytical essays on the characters and themes of *Les Misérables* were collected and subjected to qualitative analysis. The aim was to evaluate their use of advanced vocabulary, complex linguistic structures, and their ability to express critical thinking on complex social and philosophical concepts.

3.1. Data Analysis Method

For data analysis, Pearson correlation analysis and thematic analysis were employed. These methods were used to examine the relationship between students' pre-test and post-test scores, as well as their understanding and analysis of the social and philosophical themes present in the text.

3.1.1. Analytical Charts

1. Scatter Plot:

Pearson correlation analysis was utilized to assess the relationship between pre-test and post-test scores. The correlation coefficient of 0.942 indicates a very strong and positive relationship, meaning that reading *Les Misérables* significantly enhanced students' linguistic abilities and critical thinking skills.

Scatter Plot of Pre-Test Scores vs. Post-Test Scores with Pearson Correlation

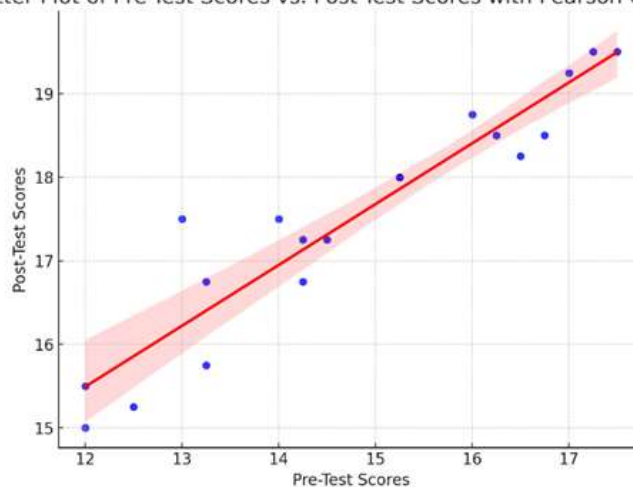


Figure 1: Median pre-test and post-test scores of students after analyzing *Les Misérables*.

The scatter plot illustrates the direct and meaningful relationship between pre-test and post-test scores. It clearly shows that students who scored higher in the pre-test also demonstrated significant improvement in the post-test, highlighting the positive impact of studying *Les Misérables* on their language skills and critical thinking.

2. Line Plot:

A line plot was used to display the changes in students' scores throughout the study. This plot illustrates the progression of pre-test and post-test scores for each student. It can be observed that most students showed a significant increase in their scores after studying the text.



Figure 2: Changes in students' language proficiency and critical thinking before and after studying *Les Misérables*.

The line plot demonstrates the changes in students' scores from the pre-test to the post-test. Overall, students achieved higher scores after studying *Les Misérables*, confirming the positive impact of this literary text on their language and analytical skills.

3. Histogram

A histogram was used to compare the distribution of pre-test and post-test scores. This chart displays the distribution of scores in both tests and compares the spread of scores between the two stages. It is observed that the post-test scores have shifted towards higher values, with a reduction in the spread of scores.



Figure 3: Histogram showing the distribution of pre-test and post-test scores for linguistic and analytical abilities.

The histogram illustrates the distribution of pre-test and post-test scores. The post-test scores show improvement compared to the pre-test, with less variability. This indicates an increase in the students' linguistic and analytical proficiency following the study of the novel.

4. Analysis of Findings

The findings of this study indicate that reading the novel *Les Misérables* has significantly contributed to enhancing students' language skills and strengthening their critical thinking abilities. The high correlation coefficient and the results of the charts confirm that complex and multilayered literary texts, such as *Les Misérables*, can be highly effective in fostering these skills. Based on Jean-Louis Dufays' theory, this research confirms that active interaction between the reader and the text plays a crucial role in developing students' analytical and critical thinking skills.

4.1. Statistical Analysis Results

1. Pearson Correlation Coefficient:

- The Pearson correlation coefficient is 0.942, indicating a very strong and positive relationship between pre-test and post-test scores. This result suggests that students who achieved higher scores in the pre-test also showed significant improvement in the post-test.

2. p-value:

- The obtained p-value is 1.64×10^{-9} , which is significantly smaller than 0.05. This result indicates that the relationship between the pre-test and post-test scores is statistically significant, and the likelihood of this correlation occurring by chance is extremely low.

4.2. Interpretation of Results:

This analysis indicates that the study and analysis of *Les Misérables* has had a significant impact on enhancing students' language skills and critical thinking abilities. The very strong and positive correlation between pre-test and post-test scores suggests that students who scored higher in the pre-test showed a considerable improvement in their scores after analyzing the work. These results support the hypothesis that studying literature, especially multilayered and content-rich texts like *Les Misérables*, can contribute to improving language skills and critical thinking among language learners.

5. Conclusion

The findings of this study underscore the significant role that literature, particularly complex and multi-layered texts like *Les Misérables*, plays in enhancing both language skills and critical thinking among advanced French literature students. The application of Jean-Louis Dufays' theory of textual interpretation provided a theoretical framework that demonstrated how students' active engagement with a text can lead to a deeper understanding of its linguistic and philosophical dimensions.

The results from Pearson correlation analysis confirmed a strong positive relationship between students' pre-test and post-test scores. This indicates that those who initially performed better in language proficiency and critical thinking tasks continued to improve after engaging with *Les Misérables*. The very high correlation coefficient (0.942) between the two sets of scores suggests that analyzing a literary text not only improves vocabulary and syntactic mastery but also enhances the students' ability to think critically about complex social and ethical issues embedded in the narrative. One of the most significant aspects of the study was the use of literary analysis to strengthen critical thinking. Students were encouraged to dissect characters, themes, and narrative structures in *Les Misérables*, moving beyond surface-level comprehension to explore the deeper, often hidden, meanings of the text. This approach forced students to question, analyze, and reevaluate their understanding of justice, morality, and social dynamics as depicted in the novel. The shift in students' ability to engage with these themes critically was most evident in their written analyses, where a marked improvement in their use of advanced vocabulary and complex sentence structures was observed.

The observations from classroom discussions further support the hypothesis that literature fosters critical thinking. Students' active participation in discussions about philosophical concepts such as justice and poverty demonstrated their growing ability to engage with these issues in a thoughtful and analytical manner. The qualitative analysis of their written assignments also showed a significant enhancement in their ability to articulate and defend their positions on these topics using evidence from the text.

Moreover, the integration of cultural and linguistic elements in teaching literature proved to be a key factor in developing students' analytical abilities. By encouraging students to reflect on the social, ethical, and cultural contexts of *Les Misérables*, the study enabled them to gain a more nuanced understanding of how literature reflects and critiques societal structures. This reflection not only improved their comprehension of the novel but also fostered a greater appreciation for the interconnectedness of language, culture, and critical inquiry.

The findings from this study have several important implications for the field of language and literature education. First, they demonstrate the efficacy of using complex literary texts to improve both language proficiency and critical thinking. Second, the study suggests that incorporating Dufays' theory of textual interpretation into the curriculum can provide students with the tools they need to engage with literature in a more meaningful and critical way. This approach encourages students to become active participants in the learning process, thereby improving their ability to analyze, interpret, and synthesize information from diverse sources.

In conclusion, the study confirms that literature, particularly works like *Les Misérables*, plays a crucial role in the development of both linguistic and cognitive skills. The students who engaged with this text not only improved their language proficiency but also demonstrated a heightened ability to think critically about complex social and philosophical issues. These results underscore the importance of including rich, multi-layered literary texts in advanced language courses as a means of fostering both linguistic competence and critical thinking abilities. Further research could explore the long-term effects of literary analysis on students' overall cognitive development and its potential application in other language learning contexts.

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